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Forest Service NEWS



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FOREST SERVICE ANNOUNCES NATIONAL POLICY ON OLD GROWTH

WASHINGTON, Oct. 19--Old-growth forests are valuable as diverse and productive ecosystems and will be managed as such under a new national policy announced today by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service.

"For the first time as an agency, we are recognizing the importance of old growth on a national level," FS Chief F. Dale Robertson said. "Old-growth forests are important ecosystems that we are just beginning to understand. We've learned enough to know that a significant share of them deserve to be protected and managed for posterity."

The Forest Service has developed a position statement embracing the many significant values of old growth. The statement includes guidance on old-growth definitions, land use decisions, silvicultural practices, and research.

"For example, we will reduce the use of traditional clearcutting methods," Robertson said. "Instead, we will increase the retention of residual trees, snags, dead-and-down material, and logging debris."

Other actions include:

- * Reducing the fragmentation of old-growth forests;
- * Maintaining future options for significant old-growth forests until more is learned about them by selectively locating timber sales;
- * Managing some forest stands on extended rotations in order to develop their old-growth values as well as provide for timber products;
- * Creating future old-growth forests through management activities as well as natural events;
- * Getting a better idea of how much old growth exists and where it is located;
- * Increasing research efforts directed to old-growth ecosystems and their management. For example, in fiscal 1990 a \$1.051 million increase is funded for old-growth research.

"We do not anticipate an immediate impact on our timber sale program since our forest plans provide for many old-growth values," Robertson said. "However, there will be an impact when we complete the final forest plans in California, Oregon, and Washington, and as we amend or revise other forest plans due to a greater emphasis on old-growth values."

The Forest Service also has developed a national ecological definition of old growth forests based on structural attributes that can be identified and measured. "This generic definition will guide the development of specific definitions by forest types and provide consistency in identifying the extent and location of old-growth forests through our forest inventories," Robertson said.

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POSITION STATEMENT ON NATIONAL FOREST OLD-GROWTH VALUES

The Forest Service recognizes the many significant values associated with old-growth forests, such as biological diversity, wildlife and fisheries habitat, recreation, aesthetics, soil productivity, water quality, and industrial raw material. Old growth on the National Forests will be managed to provide the foregoing values for present and future generations. Decisions on managing existing old-growth forests to provide these values will be made in the development and implementation of forest plans. These plans shall also provide for a succession of young forests into old-growth forests in light of their depletion due to natural events or harvest.

Old-growth forests encompass the late stages of stand development and are distinguished by old trees and related structural attributes. These attributes, such as tree size, canopy layers, snags, and down trees, generally define forests that are in an old-growth condition. The specific attributes vary by forest type. Old-growth definitions are to be developed by forest type or type groups for use in determining the extent and distribution of old-growth forests.

Where goals for providing old-growth values are not compatible with timber harvesting, lands will be classified as unsuitable for timber production. Where these goals can be met by such measures as extending the final harvest age well beyond the normal rotation or by using silvicultural practices that maintain or establish specific old-growth values, lands will be classified as suitable for timber production. In making these determinations, consideration shall be given to the extent and distribution of old growth on National Forest lands that are Congressionally or administratively withdrawn from timber harvest, as well as adjacent ownerships.

Old-growth values shall be considered in designing the dispersion of old growth. This may range from a network of old-growth stands for wildlife habitat to designated areas for public visitation. In general, areas to be managed for old-growth values are to be distributed over individual National Forests with attention given to minimizing the fragmentation of old growth into small isolated areas. Old growth on lands suitable for timber production and not subject to extended rotations is to be scheduled for harvest to establish young stands which more fully utilize potential timber productivity and also meet other resource objectives.

Regions with support from Research shall continue to develop forest type old-growth definitions, conduct old growth inventories, develop and implement silvicultural practices to maintain or establish desired old-growth values, and explore the concept of ecosystem management on a landscape basis. Where appropriate, land management decisions are to maintain future options so the results from the foregoing efforts can be applied in subsequent decisions. Accordingly, field units are to be innovative in planning and carrying out their activities in managing old-growth forests for their many significant values.

GENERIC DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION OF OLD-GROWTH FORESTS

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Purpose and Scope

The following describes the ecologically important structural features of old-growth ecosystems. Measureable criteria for these attributes will be established in more specific definitions for forest types, habitat types, plant associations or groupings of them. The intent of the generic definition is to guide design of specific definitions and new inventories that include measurement of specific attributes. Although old-growth ecosystems may be distinguished functionally as well as structurally, this definition is restricted primarily to stand-level structural features which are readily measured in forest inventory.

Definition

Old-growth forests are ecosystems distinguished by old trees and related structural attributes. Old growth encompasses the later stages of stand development that typically differ from earlier stages in a variety of characteristics which may include tree size, accumulations of large dead woody material, number of canopy layers, species composition, and ecosystem function.

Description

The age at which old-growth develops and the specific structural attributes that characterize old growth will vary widely according to forest type, climate, site conditions and disturbance regime. For example, old-growth in fire-dependent forest types may not differ from younger forests in the number of canopy layers or accumulation of down woody material. However, old-growth is typically distinguished from younger growth by several of the following attributes:

1. Large trees for species and site.
2. Wide variation in tree sizes and spacing.
3. Accumulations of large-size dead standing and fallen trees that are high relative to earlier stages.
4. Decadence in the form of broken or deformed tops or bole and root decay.
5. Multiple canopy layers
6. Canopy gaps and understory patchiness.

Compositionally, old growth encompasses both older forests dominated by early seral species, such as fire-dependent species, and forests in later successional stages dominated by shade tolerant species. Rates of change in composition and structure are slow relative to younger forests. Different stages or classes of old growth will be recognizable in many forest types.

Sporadic, low to moderate severity disturbances are an integral part of the internal dynamics of many old-growth ecosystems. Canopy openings resulting from the death of overstory trees often give rise to patches of small trees, shrubs, and herbs in the understory.

Old-growth is not necessarily "virgin" or "primeval." Old-growth could develop following human disturbances.

The structure and function of an old-growth ecosystem will be influenced by its stand size and landscape position and context.

